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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 002591

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS KDEM NI

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN POLITICAL FIGURES TALK OF REMOVING A STUMBLING OBASANJO

REF: A. LAGOS 2513

1B. ABUJA 2075

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne per 1.4 b and d

¶1. (S) Based on the Consul General's conversations with several political contacts over the past few days, talk of "what to do with President Obasanjo" is widespread. Many Southern political figures believe Obasanjo is not only unpopular and increasingly detached from sound political moorings, but also politically vulnerable. A weak economy and a rather dispirited holiday season only added fuel to this uncharitable sentiment. In the view of these political figures, Obasanjo's mishandling of his exchange of letters with People's Democratic Party (PDP) Chairman Audu Ogbeh epitomizes the president's detachment and weakness.

¶2. (S) Distilled to its essence, Ogbeh's letter delivered two broad messages to Obasanjo (reftels). First, Ogbeh cautioned that he was beginning to see political storm clouds gather in such a way that reminded him of the early signs of trouble that presaged the downfall of the Second Republic in ¶1983. Secondly, Ogbeh observed that economic and social conditions in Nigeria were amiss; he urged Obasanjo to take steps to improve the economic lot of the average Nigerian. However, because of his own desire to jettison Ogbeh, Obasanjo chose to focus on the first message and to purposefully misinterpret it as a threat not a warning. His critics say he ignored the second message about Nigeria's economic sickness, because he does not see the reality of the current situation. While Ogbeh's letter was an accurate barometer of public opinion, Obasanjo and his minions saw it as such an inaccuracy that they could expect this perceived misstep by Ogbeh to cost him his job. Thus, they leaked the letter, hoping to publicly rub Ogbeh's nose in it. However, publication of the letter only strengthened Ogbeh's position in the public mind and thus ultimately protected his position within the party.

¶3. (S) Obasanjo also misjudged his own political standing. Obasanjo believed the revelations in his response letter would hurt Ogbeh. Instead, they have hurt Obasanjo. Miscalculating his strength within the party, Obasanjo believed he could force Ogbeh from the PDP chairmanship. But Vice President Atiku has more control of the party's internal structure than Obasanjo, and Ogbeh is aligned with Atiku. After weathering Obasanjo's blow, Ogbeh has now gone on the counter-offensive. Ogbeh has called the PDP National Executive Committee to meet January 4 to tackle the party's current foremost issue: the 2003 election fraud in Anambra State. This meeting has all the portents of another presidential setback--Obasanjo may be forced to jettison his support for Anambra businessman/heavy Chris Uba.

¶4. (S) The rumblings in the PDP are reflective of the angst making its rounds through the political elite in Lagos. Obasanjo's opponents strongly believe he intends to continue his presidency beyond 2007. This belief, coupled with many political operatives' assessment that Obasanjo is running the country poorly, has led to significant chatter about the possibility of removing Obasanjo from office. A lot of this may be the futile chatter of opposition politicians chastising the person responsible for their being sidelined. Whenever Nigeria hits a bad patch, rumors of coups arise. This time, the ease and frequency with which people broach the subject is noteworthy.

¶5. (S) Perennial presidential candidate and opposition politician Tunji Braithwaite (strictly protect) told CG that even Yoruba politicians have been holding a series of meetings lamenting about Obasanjo's performance, or lack thereof. He said the "hot heads," the most vocal of the bunch, have been advocating some type of quick ouster. Some endorsed encouraging the military to take over. Braithwaite said the more moderate attendees wanted to explore impeachment proceedings using Obasanjo's tacit support for Chris Uba in the Anambra political saga as the gravamen of their charges. The impeachment proponents argue that it is the safer approach, and would at least constrain Obasanjo's behavior while the proceedings were being conducted. The CG

told Braithwaite that it was a dire mistake for a civilian politician to advocate a military takeover. The CG continued that such a move would be disastrous for Nigeria and its international relationships. Whatever opposition is mounted, it must be done through legal, democratic channels, the CG stressed.

16. (S) Professor Ukande Damachi (strictly protect), a long-time contact and advisor to former Head of State Babangida, informed CG that Babangida was very worried about the potential for a military coup. Damachi said Babangida was spending both his time and own money in trying to keep a lid on the military. Babangida was not doing this for altruistic reasons, of course. He has every intention of running in 2007 and does not want the country to fall apart before then, Damachi confided. Damachi and the CG discussed that Obasanjo possibly could lower the political temperature if he took steps to resolve the Anambra crisis and to ensure military pensions and salaries were paid timely.

17. (S) Comment: Obasanjo is a general and thus should know better than to end up facing too many battles on different fronts. He has more enemies than allies and the list of the former appears to be growing. Politically, he has overstepped and overstayed his welcome in the Anambra crisis. He has let the crass antics and ambitions of Chris Uba drag him into an affair that never really offered much benefit. Now that it has become a national scandal and has escalated into an intra-party showdown, Anambra could become an Achilles heel. Obasanjo would be wise to quickly and decisively estrange himself from Chris Uba. That would be a key first step in what appears to be a long row of fence mending that he will need to do in order to put a damper on much of the chatter that is building against him. End comment.

18. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Abuja.
BROWNE